

## Idle Minds ~ Boredom in the Workplace Results from a Study Conducted in January 2008



Have you considered the role boredom may play in your workplace? Many organizations do not, at least not directly, despite the fact that boredom contributes significantly to productivity issues, presenteeism and absenteeism.

According to an online survey conducted by The Employers' Choice Inc. in January, 2008, only 56% of HR professionals surveyed used their employee satisfaction/climate survey to ask questions about employees' level of engagement and boredom.

Simplistically, boredom is "having nothing to do." While we all experience moments of boredom, true workplace boredom is much more complex. The boredom experience ranges from a basic dislike of tasks, to coping with monotony, insufficient stimulation and challenge, a dull work environment, hypervigilant monitoring of mood, to existential boredom where there is dissatisfaction and a lack of meaning with life generally.

What are the primary contributors to boredom? From an individual perspective, researchers have identified four key factors;

- the need for novelty – external stimulation,
- inner "amusement" skills - the ability to keep yourself occupied,
- attention - the ability to focus, and
- emotional factors - frequent monitoring and focus on mood.

We also have to be cognizant that the workplace and the nature of work has changed over the years. Some of the resulting work practices are boredom inducing. Practices such as automation, responding continually via e-mail, paperwork overload, endless meetings - sometimes referred to as "death by meeting", and reduced or restricted job autonomy have the potential to induce boredom. Add to this the phenomena of call centres, 24/7 operations where the night workers miss out on the social interaction opportunities available to day workers and it is no surprise that boredom is an arising concern.

As a profession, human resources is not immune to boredom. One third of respondents to the January 2008 survey reported being "bored" or "very bored" in their roles. Reasons cited include; lack of challenge in the role, little opportunity for advancement, lack of recognition of skills, absence of succession planning and rightsizing that has resulted in very lean organizations.

Does any of this really matter? The harsh reality is that the workplace has always had some elements of boredom built into it, but there are dangers and risks associated with boredom. From an individual perspective, the dangers include a much higher risk for anxiety, depression, and drug and alcohol addiction, dissatisfaction with work and poor work performance (productivity).

From a business perspective, the risks include reduced productivity, abuse of the internet, increased turnover, absenteeism, increased error rates and overall less engagement with the workplace. From our January 2008 survey, we know that respondents report productivity loss, abuse of the internet, turnover and absenteeism as the four most prevalent effects of boredom in their workplaces. Current research is also showing that boredom is a precursor to burnout and a contributor to work place aggression.

Interestingly, while 56% of respondents to our survey reported conducting workplace climate surveys specifically addressing boredom issues, only 40% of total respondents address the issue of boredom in performance reviews and goal setting activities. While it is a best practice to address boredom / challenge issues in performance reviews, other strategies can also be employed.

We encourage employers to examine boredom from the aspect of control; giving employees greater autonomy over how and when things are done allows greater flexibility in the job to meet the individual employee's needs for stimulation, etc. From a job design viewpoint, you may want to encourage the development of positions by interspersing more interesting interactive tasks with boring ones, and reduce the reliance on scripts or rigid formulaic responses. From an organizational effectiveness perspective, you may want to focus on running meetings efficiently, or consider using face technology such as video conferencing rather than e-mail or telephone conference calls. From a benefits perspective, you may want to consider a tuition reimbursement program, training and development programs, mentoring opportunities and leadership skill training.

Most importantly, from a human resources perspective, ask the boredom / challenge questions and work with your employees to find solutions. The gain will not only be in combating boredom but in enhancing engagement and retention.

*Margaret Cernigoj, MA is a Human Resources Consultant with The Employers' Choice Inc. She can be reached via e-mail at [mcernigoj@theemployerschoice.com](mailto:mcernigoj@theemployerschoice.com) or via phone at (905)-874-1035 x. 432.*